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THE ABSTRACT AND NATURALISM IN ART.

BY W. M. ROSSETTI.

No subject connected with fine art has supplied more lavish opportunity for the talking of nonsense than "the ideal." Of none has the discussion been more blighting to the birth and practical expression of ideas in Art; while confusion and contradiction on every hand meet the inquirer into even the meaning which writers have attached to the word, and the theories which they have spun from it.

A careful sifting of what has been promulgated regarding the ideal would doubtless, however, elicit some valuable truth; but we prefer at present to begin at the other end, and consider how far a non-ideal or naturalistic method of treatment may be adequate for the expression of subjects wholly or in part abstract. Proceeding thus, we obtain a positive basis to start from, and may avoid many of the pitfalls of dubious nomenclature and speculation.

All art, from the most simple and direct transcript of a visible fact to the most complex or most analogical rendering of an idea in the mind, must consist of two elements in conjunction—the subject and the execution. No position can be plainer or surer than this, and yet no small portion of the confusion which involves the question of the ideal arises from practical forgetfulness of it, and from the application to the executive part of considerations and terms properly belonging to the subject, whether of perception or conception. The two things are necessarily united in Art, but they are both separate in themselves, and separately to be regarded in any safe analysis of their relation.

An abstract subject, in the most entire meaning of the words, is one which neither is nor can be seen by the eye of sense, but only by the eye of faith. All supernatural beings, all mental or moral qualities, or powers of nature personified, constitute abstract subject. In a secondary degree, all events of whose actual *modus operandi* no visible type is attainable—say the creation of Adam or of Eve, the translation of Enoch, or the reception of the tables of the law—are abstract subject; and this, whether the event be truly believed in as a downright fact, or only mentally regarded as occurring. It may be desirable or undesirable to select the latter for treatment in Art; but with that consideration at present we have nothing to do.

There is, however, a far wider sense in which the subject of the artist is to be regarded as abstract. The two classes we have just specified are abstract in certain properties of their own; but there exists not perhaps the class of subject which cannot hold of the abstract according as it is contemplated by the human mind. Whatever is contemplated in its large relations to the divine scheme of which it forms a part, or contemplated for the sake of the lesson,

the excellence, or the beauty which it conveys, becomes by that very operation abstract. It ceases to be a separate and isolated visible fact, and becomes a type of something beyond and above it. All great art is, in a manner, symbolic art. It represents, indeed, a fact; but in the fact, a principle and a significance. Allegorical art represents facts, not in the form wherein they are actually cognizable by the sense, but by abstracting certain of their necessary elements, and expressing these in a form not literally their own. Symbolic art, in the wider sense, takes the fact itself, and dwells upon those characters of it which are typical of all cognate facts, and which reveal the inner meaning of them. From Giotto's Pieta or Leonardo's Last Supper, to any of the noble moral series of Hogarth—the Rake's Progress, or the Harlot's Progress, the Marriage à la Mode, or the Industrious and Idle Apprentices—this mark is stamped upon the great art. Hogarth may direct the eye to the beating of hemp or the sipping of chocolate in morning curl-papers; but he directs the mind to virtue and the approval with which God visibly marks it; to turpitude and retribution; to the great drama whose last act is eternity. The debased Italian schools and the low Dutch school know nothing of this. They represent facts as facts, often rather as fallacies—not as what they are, but what they are not—cannot abide in contemplation, but in baseless supposition, or the mere sight of the animal. The Dutchman paints clothes and bodies, and not souls; the Italian, forms and compositions, and not emotions. And bodies, however carefully or meanly clothed, are not men; and forms, however scientifically composed, are not life. The first remain an elaborate nullity; the second, a compiled illusion.

The test of a symbolic bearing holds good no less in so positive a branch of art as direct portraiture than in others to which it might at first seem more immediately applicable. That portraiture is good, and in the best sense high art, which symbolizes a man's life and character through his face; that is low which stays at gauging and mapping out his features. At the same time, it is to be observed that all art which is not high or symbolic art is by no means necessarily bad art, though of the lower order. So also much symbolic subject may be vile through the shortcomings of the mind which adopts and executes it, and only the viler by "measuring the height from which it fell." And again (to repeat what we have already noted, for this is a point on which we would by no means be misunderstood), the symbolic bearing may be often as much in beauty as in any moral force, or even in beauty alone—and especially of color, if the art admits of it.

Having so far attempted briefly to define the first component of what we are to examine, Abstract Subject, we must now do the same for the second component, Natural-

istic Treatment. Now, at starting, let it be distinctly understood that naturalistic treatment is not treatment by means of *common* nature only. To say that St. Peter was a "common fisherman," and that, therefore, a common fisherman is the right model for St. Peter on the naturalistic principle, is so small a fragment of truth as to become plain falsehood. St. Peter was an extremely *uncommon* fisherman. The *essence* of Peter is that he became a fisher of men; the accident of Peter is that he was a fisher of fish. The essence of a naturalistic representation of him therefore, is to express the qualities of his soul—the fiery zeal, the worshipping love, the stumbling of human weakness. For supplying the artist with these, the right model is a man possessing, in development or potentially, the same characteristics as nearly as may be. Unless these are given, by one means or another, the St. Peter of the artist is not a naturalistic St. Peter. True, he may have these, and yet not be naturalistic; he may be made, in other respects, a Greek philosopher, or a decorous respectability, instead of a Christian fisherman. Naturalism requires that he should be weather-beaten, hard-handed, ill-dressed, perhaps not over good-looking: these things it does require, joined with those "weightier matters of the law" which concern the character of the man. But this principle is at the very foundation of the question—no random acceptance of the first model that offers is naturalism: it is only vulgarism. By no possible costuming and handling will Hudibras become the right model for Don Quixote.

Naturalism, then, is that method of treatment which sticks to accessible natural models both in essentials and in details; perceiving that the details are neither unimportant on the one hand, nor capable of ever replacing the essentials on the other. It is, in fact, accurate portraiture; and, just as it was false portraiture, or no portraiture at all, to hold out a likeness of Mr. Cobden as that of the late poisoner Palmer, while both men could be studied from the life, so, in representing a personage of past history who cannot be so studied, it is no portraiture, and therefore no naturalism, to take a model whose mental physiology does not correspond.

"Accessible natural models," we have said; implying both the limit and the latitude which the naturalistic artist works within. To adopt a method of representation which he has not gathered from his own sight of nature (which the artist of the ideal principle allows himself), is not naturalism. But neither must he deny himself the treatment of all subjects for which he cannot find a literal counterpart. This would be reducing Art from representation to duplication; and, therefore, if he takes the closest type of his subject which he finds accessible, he is not the less a naturalist, though something closer may exist elsewhere.

The considerations we have here noted may assist us to form an opinion as to how far literal accuracy of race, costume, and so on, is needed in the naturalistic treatment of subjects of past history—for instance, of the life of Christ. But the entire question is influenced by various

other exigencies as well, which we cannot enter upon here.

Let us now apply the data we have arrived at regarding naturalistic treatment to the three orders which we specified of abstract subject.

Firstly, as to supernatural beings, or abstract personifications. A supernatural or spiritual being is not an object of sight, but of faith; or at least we may assume this to be so for the purpose of the present inquiry, inasmuch as, if any one has actually seen a spirit, which must evidently be more ideal than the most ideal conception of a human being about one, the ideal and the naturalistic treatments necessarily converge, and the only thing the artist has to do is to show the spirit as he beheld it. If Blake saw the Spiritual Form of Nelson, he merely needed to take its portrait. Other artists, who do not see spirits, have to imagine them; and, having imagined, to portray them as best they may. Now, Ruskin never said a truer thing than, in comparing Dante's precision and definition with Milton's comparative vagueness, that "the imagination is the seeing and asserting faculty." Loose supposition may indeed demur at this statement, but it is ascertainably true. If, then, the imagination is intense in proportion to its positiveness, and if (which is most certain) the only means which the artist commands of representing a thing is by defining it in one degree or another, it should seem that the more definite the representation, the nearer it comes to realizing the idea. It is further to be noted, that no man can conceive of what he *has not* seen, except by imagining certain conditions of what he *has* seen. He may, for instance, imagine a spirit as possessing a certain internal light of its own, or as brightened and glorified by some external light more perfect than falls upon natural objects. How is he to represent such an idea? If he does not make the representation a recognizable condition of something he has seen, he fails to realize, not only anything in nature, but even his own conception, which is itself only a condition of what he has seen; but he will be perfectly justified in heightening (so far as Art *can* heighten) that condition, because the very thing he has to represent is something above nature. In one sense, this is a departure from naturalism; but it is scarcely so in the complete sense. For, as the *essence* of super-nature is to be above nature, the essence of naturalism in treating it must be the same, provided the points in which nature is exceeded be only excessive conditions of something natural. To hold doggedly to the natural in detail, would be, in this case, to prefer the detail to the essence; and that, as we have already seen, is pseudo-naturalism.

Yet, even in this extreme case, as it appears to us, the true artist will be very chary in exceeding nature in the details. For himself, his own conception is what he must render; but other men cannot see his conception. For other men the primary need is, not that the representation should look like what a particular artist has conceived, but that it should look like something verily existing, though invisible to the eye of sense. Unless the artist succeeds in

making the spiritual being conceivable to others through his representation, he has not succeeded at all; not even for his own self, as the conception must assuredly surpass the execution. If the spectator is once placed in the region of facts, he may be led on from the lower fact to the higher, but if he is set face to face with only the artist's imagination of a thing, he may feel it as no more than a pleasant vagary—not his own vagary, and therefore unimpressive. Again, the artist's conception must be based upon conditions of what he has seen. Unless these are indicated with sufficient clearness and cogency, they remain to the spectator merely conditions which *he* has *not* seen, and so of little help to the conceiving of an idea correspondent with the artist's. In fine, the artist will safely (though not indispensably in all cases) reject, in his spiritual figure, any naturalism of accessory which speaks of man's handiwork. Direct precept on this point is likelier to go wrong than acute feeling; but generally the less of detail of workmanship that does not convey symbolic meaning the better. Pure color, pure light, and pure expression, will be the surest resources of rendering; and in these as much naturalism as is consistent with the idea of spirit.

Abstract Personifications—as of Melancholy, Sleep, Charity, Pride, Britannia, and so on—follow the same general rule as to naturalism of treatment. However, as it is not the object to impress the mind with an idea of the actual, or even possible, existence of such beings, the artist is less called upon to realize the details of form or accessory in cases where the entire embodiment proclaims itself at once as abstract. For instance, an angel may be represented as a winged female; Victory may be represented as the same. The existence of angels is believed; but victory is known to be merely an event, and not a person. Naturalism of rendering is therefore less incumbent or appropriate; though, even here, it must not be left wholly out of sight, or, what between the unreal subject and the unreal treatment, the whole thing together becomes inane and dead; and such, indeed, is its necessary tendency from the very nature of the subject.

There is, however, a distinct class of abstract personifications with respect to which this principle becomes modified. This is the class where the entire embodiment does *not* proclaim itself at once as abstract. Sleep, for example, or Agriculture, may, in the essentials, be adequately personified simply by a figure sleeping, or by a husbandman or countrywoman; the personification, in such cases, consisting so far in nothing more than typifying a class in an individual. In such cases we believe that, after a right choice of model, the rule is strict naturalism of rendering; with this proviso, that such accessories as might belong as well to the untypical individual as to the personification be reduced to as few as possible, and that the abstract nature of the subject be unmistakably indicated; not, indeed, by any failure of naturalistic treatment, but by the introduction of some attribute, emblem, or detail, into the conception of the *subject*, which could only belong to it as abstract.

Secondly, as to events of whose actual *modus operandi* no visible type is attainable. Of all subjects, these are the least adapted for pure naturalistic treatment. When you do not know how a thing was done, you cannot explain it to others, you can only affirm it. In speech, the affirmation of the result can be made without so much as an allusion to the process. In Art this cannot be done; the process must be somehow alluded to, if not explained or exhibited. Now, in speech, if you cannot explain a thing, and yet want to communicate some of your ideas as to how it was accomplished, you resort to a figurative or analogical, not a literal method of description. That is the artist's resource. He *must* tell something of the process; he cannot tell it literally; he tells it figuratively. When you cannot do a thing as you would, there is no truer wisdom than to submit wholly to necessity, and do it willingly and thoroughly as best you may. There are several minor considerations influencing this question of a figurative expression of subjects which cannot be rendered literally; but these would take too long to develop, and the one which we have stated is paramount, and sufficient for our present purpose. It is sufficient to justify and enforce a figurative rendering of subjects which cannot be definitely explained. The creation of the world, for instance, is a subject whose actual process it is utterly impossible to imagine, much more to represent. It can only be implied. In the sculptures of Rouen Cathedral it is implied, and sufficiently so for the imagination, by a small series of bas-reliefs, in which the Creator, under a strictly human form, holds in his hands successively a circle, containing now the heavenly luminaries, now a tree, now a fish, and so on. This is a bold conventionalism of invention; and it is right to have made even the details conventional. If the fish, say a herring, were drawn with natural-history accuracy, the impression conveyed would be that of a man holding a circular portrait of a herring. By the typical conventionalism of the treatment, the mind is at once informed that it must not abide in what is shown, but advance to what is implied; and it arrives, without difficulty, at the conception of one of the most enormous events within the scheme of Deity, and the lapse of ages. But take another instance. The last judgment is an anticipated event which wholly overwhelms the mind. No art can exhibit the grandeur of its scale, or the mystery of its operation. These are not to be exhibited, but only suggested; and reducing the event to its simplest typical elements, it will be adequately suggested by the figure of Christ central; on his right a human form beside an angel; on his left a human form beside a devil. The real fact may, of course, be approached much nearer than that; but that will do for us just now. This is a mode of representation absolutely and nakedly typical, not realistic; but it differs from that previously mentioned, inasmuch as it shows, so far as it extends, the events in their true guise, not by a mere conventionalism of action. And just as the force of any spoken description of this event, supposing the same figurative emblem of it to be adopted.

would be enhanced, not diminished, by whatever vigor of speech should make us feel that the Christ was truly the Judge, once crucified, of all the earth, the man human, the angel angelic, and the devil devilish; so whatever force of naturalistic rendering shall express the same facts in form, will be appropriate and needful. The representation is indeed *conceived* typically; but its impressiveness depends on our feeling the type to be real as far as it goes.

The rule, then, appears to be this—The conception and expression of such subjects must be frankly typical. If the type adopted be one conventional *per se*, the treatment must correspond. If the type be, within its own limits, composed of things as they exist, or can be conceived actually to exist, it may be rendered naturalistically—of course, subject in the case of any spiritual beings or abstract embodiments that may be introduced to such modifications as have been already admitted on those heads. But, in this instance also, if any detail of the type can be better expressed by a conventional than by a realistic treatment, let the conventional be unhesitatingly admitted, and the bolder the better. Further, we believe that Ruskin is right in saying that all such typical (or, as he terms them, grotesque) conceptions should seldom, if ever, be realized to completion in *method* of treatment; that is to say, that, though the form, or the light and shade, or the color, singly, may be naturalistic, the three methods should not be combined, or not all combined naturalistically; and, as abstract color constitutes a most precious mode of expression herein, we would advocate, generally speaking, its use in combination with such forms, whether conventional or naturalistic, as have been already prescribed.

Thirdly, as to subjects of actual and visible fact, with a symbolic bearing. In these, conceive the subject as wholly, as grandly, as impressively as you can; send out your mind to the four quarters of the heaven, for whatever may aid you to show that you see a meaning in the fact; insist, as may subserve your purpose, on the beauty or on the moral value of the fact, or on what other virtue you apprehend in it; lay yourself open to all its teachings, all its combinations and relations, and *then* realize to the utmost, stint naturalism on no side. This rule, as far as we have seen towards following it to its results, has no exception. There may possibly be points at which the artist shall see good to break through it, and in such wise that no man shall gainsay him; but we have not calculated, nor estimated, nor catalogued these—we know not of them. Only be not too careful of mechanical accuracy. Tremble not to record such experience of nature's truth as you have attained to, because you fear you have not yet grasped it all. If a phenomenon is above you, and you yet require to use it, render it as far as you can, and let its shortcomings answer for themselves. If you need a daring conventionalism, which there is no mistaking, adopt it, as Tintoret cuts his trees sheer off, to show what is beyond them in the sky; that is not anti-naturalism; it is only leaving off a particular part of the picture short of the frame. If you want two

or three phases of your story instead of one, put one in the foreground and others in the background, if you will. Be not too curious of scientific truth, but record what you see as you see it, and as near as you can give it. The only anti-naturalism which occurs to us as in some exceptional cases admissible, is the defining certain features or incidents of the distance beyond true optical effect; and even this were better done in so trenchant and arbitrary a fashion as to become strictly a conventionalism rather than an anti-naturalism; a second plane of the picture rather than a violation of the first.

Let it not be objected that perfect naturalism of treatment hampers and obscures the effort to make the visible fact expressive of a further fact or a principle—the effort to make it symbolic. The symbolic character belongs to the conception, and not to the treatment. For the conception there are no rules. For that the penetrative eye and the understanding heart are needed. With these, no subject but can be made symbolic; without these, no symbolism that is worth the material it defaces. The visible fact is appointed by God to bear that form which it takes, and no other. The meaning of that form must be seized by the mind, the form itself must be rendered by the hand; and if the mind has seized the meaning aright, the form which conveys it cannot be better rendered than as it is.

To sum up the conclusions which we have reached: Naturalism is the right treatment for everything which the mind of the artist conceives; except that, where the necessary falling short of the human intellect and experience force the artist to adopt a typical conception, having no prototype in visible nature, he must make the treatment typical to correspond; and that, where his subject is supernatural, certain correspondent supernaturalisms of degree constitute the true naturalism.

It is curious to note how utterly uninterested the born artist mainly is as to the reasons why certain phases or properties of professed art are wrong, and others right; and, indeed, how stiff his mind is in apprehending such propositions, even when presented to him. No theory of color or form, no demonstration of the why or the wherefore, makes the slightest impression upon him. He *perceives* in a moment what the theorist takes pages or hours to prove; and does not in the least care to know what makes the thing so, but only that so it is. He will do it aright, moreover, as well as perceive it aright; but he cannot, or will not, tell you what has been his principle of action. Every now and then, though seldom, a great artist delivers himself of some theoretic views of his own upon art—as Leonardo da Vinci, Hogarth and Reynolds; but there is probably no instance on record of a great artist who concerned himself much with the theories of other men. They are for the critic, the connoisseur, and the artist of the second or lower order.—*The Spectator*.

THERE is no difference between the law of the mind and the law of the body; one, no more than the other, can be maintained without constant nourishment.—*Vauvenargues*.